

Notes from Lowell Community Meeting on April 13, 2010

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Below are some notes from the Lowell Community meeting of April 13, 2010. I have included results of the small groups, notes on the wrap-up, extended commentaries from two of my students, and some feedback on the meeting from the student moderators (nine from Fresno State and two from Fresno Pacific).

Our shared goal for the new format was increased community participation. I contend that we reached that goal, as evidenced by:

- Higher number of comments over previous meetings.
- Wider range of comments, both positive and negative, compared to previous meetings.
- More participation by Spanish-speaking residents compared to previous meetings.
(Unfortunately, the small group comments were not coded by language in which they were spoken, but I witnessed many Spanish-speakers giving their input.)

The improvements in the meeting can be captured by the story of Spanish-speaking woman who was making her comments in a small group. One of her neighbors noted that she had attended every community meeting, but before April 13, she had never spoken before.

There remains room for improvement (see below). Also, we still need to explore ways for the community to take over running the meeting.

Small Group Input Sessions

How Have Things Improved?

The Meeting

Headsets at the meeting are a great help

Good communication between community and officials

Healthy food and beverages provided at the meeting were appreciated

Thank Fresno State students for coming out to help

Community Relations

Relationship between community leaders and residents is good. Many are now on a first name basis and this is positive.

Better relationship between Spanish and English speaking residents

There is a greater relationship between English and Spanish speakers. The Spanish speakers feel more confident in speaking out.

Communication between neighbors has gotten better.

There is more pride in the neighborhood. It's not just a place to land anymore. It is a community.

Improvements in bi-lingual mediating

Crime

One late night while my family and I were sleeping, about 30 police officers came inside my home. I was shocked to see so many officers inside my home. The officers told us to get out of the house and we did, while outside an officer asked me if I knew the man they were looking for. I told the officer that I did not know the person and that he was not inside my home. The police searched my house and found the man inside my house. The point I am trying to say is that I feel secure because the police are alert.

Overall improvement in community: less gang activity

Reduction of gang activities

The residents feel safer. One woman said that feeling safer makes her feel happier.

Delinquency has decreased

More order in the streets

Less graffiti in the neighborhood

Less prostitutes on the streets

Physical Improvements

New bus stop, housing improvements

Bus stops are looking better

Back alleys cleaner

The alleys are a lot cleaner.

The streets are cleaner.

Streets seem to be more clean

Policing

More police presence

There is a better relationship between the police and the neighborhood.

Police presence

Remains to Be Done

Sex Offenders

“Sexual perverts”: What can be done for them to no longer be living here?

What can be done to remove sexual predators? “Send them to Clovis for some time instead!” (This same woman, a Spanish-speaker, also commented that the “guerros” [whites] should deal with them.)

Registered sex offenders

Concerns about children attending school with sex offenders living nearby. (This Spanish-speaking woman was referring to the fact that she lives next door to a registered sex offender whose son attends Lowell along with her children. Her main concern seemed to be to get him out of the neighborhood completely.)

The high number of registered sex offenders in the community is a strong concern in relation to their children’s safety.

Sex offenders living in the neighborhood

Fences and Dogs

There are a number of dogs running around and homes with 3 foot fences won’t keep them in or out.

Lowered fences with big dogs

We didn’t like that we had to cut our fences down (to 3 feet). Now there is more vandalism.

Dogs are loose on streets

Street dogs

Policing

It’s good to have more eyes, more patrol cars, but leave OUR cars alone.

Racial profiling (this Spanish-speaking woman said she gets off work late and has been pulled over coming home, felt it was a case of racial profiling).

Getting pulled over

Five patrol cars come when they pull over one guy on a bike (the speaker implied that this was overkill).

Need more police presence, crosswalks can be very dangerous for children to cross. There are too many people that roll the stop signs, and they do not look for pedestrians.

We need police walking around the streets

Crime, Safety, Security

Concerns remain about taggers and wrong-doers

People writing graffiti

They cut our locks off of our garages and steal from us.

Theft (break-in homes)

Vandalism

There are still problems with drugs in the park, selling and consuming

The park was made to have fun and relax with family and friends, but we cannot do that because it is too dangerous.

Drugs are too available for junior high and high school kids.

People are selling and buying drugs in the parks all day long. One woman said that she sees it every day when she walks by the park – it is openly done.

Drugs in the community

People using empty houses for prostitution, drug sale and gang activity

There needs to be a way to banish prostitutes and drug dealers.

Residents want to feel safe outside of their homes, mainly at night (and still do not)

Safety – always having to be on edge and aware. This tends to cause anxiety and it is a constant condition of living in the Lowell community.

Gangs walking like if they own their streets

There needs to be more lights around the streets and around the school

Crossing lights for school, and people crossing kids before and after school

Physical Improvements

They would like to have the streets cleaner. They want the city to start ticketing the cars that are in the way of the street cleaners.

Improvement of housing, renovation, making the overall neighborhood look better

Want a stop sign/light in the corner of San Pablo and Mckinley.

Promised to put street lights instead of the stop sign by the elementary school.

Other

Program for fixing our homes have way too many requirements. They need to be easier to obtain.

"I don't work and don't get financial assistance. What about me?"

Could use more after-school programs (regarding gang activity)

Needed: More advance notice for community projects. San Pablo Park: Not enough community involvement, notify residents earlier and more often

Would like to see more renters able to purchase homes which would create a stronger economic base.

People going through the neighborhood garbage cans before the sunrise.

Property owner's complaints about too many garage sales, but where do tenants go to do their garage sales?

Promises made by the local government that have not been kept.

What Can You Do?

GREATER CONFRONTATION OF SLUM LANDLORDS

The housing needs to improve

Greater code enforcement in family units

People need to clean their own areas

Attend meetings.

Come to the community meetings

Have neighborhood meetings and attend

Try to have neighborhood meetings where any problem can be brought up.

Speak to neighbors

Help each other

Get more involved and keep getting to know neighbors more.

There needs to be more communication between neighbors

Call the police

When there are unlawful things happening, contact the authorities. They need to be the eyes and ears for the police.

No litter

Wrap-up

Craig Scharton

Craig saw three themes in the small group discussions:

- People recognize positive changes
- There is still work to do (stray dogs, landlords, etc.)
- People want to get to know their neighbors

Araceli

Araceli saw these things in the small group discussions:

- Thirty police entered her home looking for someone – she had not seen the person but the police eventually found and detained him – this is good.
- Neighbors helping neighbors
- Reduced incidence of graffiti, prostitution, stray dogs, homeless people sifting through garbage, drugs
- City adding street lights – good

Report by Student Moderator Pete Serrato (he moderated the kids' table)

The focus group was schedule to gather youth in 7th through 12th grade. However, as the crowd separated throughout the cafeteria, table one gathers eight children between pre-preschool through 5th grade.

The focus group questions that where outlined in the prompts were asked but this group was focused on other topics outside of the community discussion. However, there was an effort to have the children “tell a story” about their community. Some children did respond, others preferred to draw their experiences while the youngest just played and kept themselves busy. All the children behaved well with each other and shared the markers. All the children were related to each other somehow. All eight children were bilingual in English and Spanish and displayed good control of both languages.

Two boys had their bikes stolen. Eric's old brother, a 5th grader at Lowell, stated that he has seen other boys in the neighborhood with the bike. The sister of the other boy who had the bike stolen stated that the bike was taken from inside their garage at the same time the family car was stolen. The oldest girl in the group stated that they were having trouble with stray dogs in the neighborhood. The dogs bark at them and cause them trouble as they go to and from school. The parents were aware of the problem and have call SPCA. The children did notice that a pit-bull had been removed from the neighborhood. One girl did see a dead cat one day.

One girl did mention that she was involved with Girl Scouts. The oldest boy said he like to play soccer on the weekends [league sports]. He called it "Saturday sports" and said that after the games he would be given food [treats] or [some type of food program].

The group did have cable television at home and enjoyed watching cartoons: Phineas and Ferb, Hannah Montana.

One of the younger girls stated that she had a pet turtle at home and was promised a poodle when she turned fifteen. [She drew the poodle on the post-it note.]

Report by Student Moderator Kim Arnold

In the area where my table was situated there were a lot of people who were not Lowell residents and so when the break out session began I only had one English speaking woman and one Spanish speaking woman. Although they could not understand each other, my translator was able to communicate to everyone what was being said. About five minutes after the session started a third woman, Spanish speaking, joined our group. There was a fourth woman with her, but she did not speak out. About halfway through the session, an English speaking woman made her way to the table and observed, agreed with a few of the comments, interjected about the neighborhood being "more than just a place to land" now, and disappeared. She seemed to be walking from group to group to get a sense of what was being said or how this break out session was being carried out. My sense was that they were all eager to have a say in what was going on in the planning and execution of Lowell community development. It was clear that a strong concern for all of the participating individuals was safety and the selling of drugs in the community. Yet, my group kept gravitating to the theme of "relationship". They seem to believe that "community" is a critical factor in fighting the issues that they are most concerned with. When the English speaking woman spoke to me about her concern of safety, she was obviously troubled. I asked her to expand on what that meant and her body became tense while her arms came up in such a way as to suggest she was protecting her body. She said, "You know, you just have to be on edge all the time." She suggested that this caused a great deal of anxiety to her. However, when discussing community and "relationship" they all seemed to derive some sort of strength from knowing that this was something they could begin to use and depend on to make their community safer. When discussing community, even if they could not understand the other person's language, they made eye contact with each other. They smiled and nodded at each other upon hearing the translation each other's comments. Empowered? I don't know. But, there was definitely something there.

Debrief of Student Moderators

Positive

- Good level of participation from those who joined a table
- Candor of comments

Needs Improvement

- No numbers on tags – this confused people
- Don't use tables – they were in the way
- Work harder at transition between first and second half, reduce exit of residents before feedback session; more work at steering people to feedback groups
- Before breakout, announce that English *and* Spanish speakers will be at each table; one student moderator noted that some women came to her table and asked, "Do you speak Spanish?" and when she said "yes," they started to talk.
- Input session was too short. Some tables were "just getting rolling" when time ended.
- There was little neighbor-neighbor dialogue in the groups; participants talked mostly to the moderator. Consider a circle of chairs set up.

Other Suggestions

- Need to shorten first half of meeting
- Use an icebreaker or some other engagement strategy in the first half of meeting
- Officials in suits and style of PowerPoints seemed intimidating to some residents
- Use anonymous submission of questions on cards during meeting, review while meeting is in progress, then ask the selected questions.
- Use the breakout format at the bi-monthly neighborhood meetings